

THE
WORKS
OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &c., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

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SERMON III.

ON THE CHRISTIAN NAME.

—And the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.—ACTS xi. 26.

THE evangelist Luke having contributed his appointed part to the history of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, proceeds, in the book we style the *Acts of the Apostles*, to inform us of the state and behaviour of those faithful followers he left behind him on earth, when he ascended in the name and behalf of his people, to that heaven from whence his love had brought him down. We are informed, that the gracious promises he had made while he was yet with them, began soon to take place; for, when the day of Pentecost was fully come (Acts ii.), the Holy Spirit descended powerfully upon them, qualified them for preaching the gospel to the whole world, and gave them an earnest of success in making their first essay the happy means of converting about three thousand souls.

The first believers, who were of one heart and one soul, who continued steadfast in the apostles doctrine, and had all things in common, would probably have been well content to have lived together in Jerusalem, till death had successively transplanted them to the Jerusalem which is above. But this was not to be their rest; and their Lord, who had appointed them to be “the salt of the earth,” and “the light of the world” (Matth. v.), made use of the rage of their enemies to effect that separation which those who are united by the grace of God are often so loath to yield to. Little did Herod and the Jews consider what would be the consequence of the persecution they raised against the church of Christ: but persecutors are always blind, and counteract their own designs. So here; for we are told, that those whom they scattered abroad “went everywhere preaching the word.” Thus the word of the Lord “ran and was glorified;” their bitterest enemies contributing to push it forward, till, in a few years, it was published “from sea to sea,” and “from the river to the ends of the earth,” Psal. lxxii.

For a while these faithful followers of the Lamb were known only by particular names, according to the different humours of different places,—*Nazarenes, Galileans, the people of that way, pestilent fellows*, and the like; but at length, when they grew more numerous, when their societies were regularly formed, and their enemies universally alarmed, they began to bear a more general and emphatical name. St. Luke has informed us, that this was the case in fact, and has likewise told us where it first obtained; and as I suppose he did not this without some design, I shall endeavour to draw some observations for our use and direction, from this remark in the text, That “the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch,” which I shall divide into two: thus,—That the first general name by which the disciples were distinguished from the world, and united among themselves, was that of *Christians*; and, secondly, That this took place first at *Antioch*. Thus the propositions lie in the text; but,

in treating of each, it may be more convenient to invert this order, and consider the latter as previous to the former.

Now, if we consider the state of the city of Antioch, before, at the time, and since the event which is here recorded; from each of these views we may gather some lesson of instruction for ourselves, which ought to be our view in all we read, but especially when we read those books “which are able to make us wise unto salvation,” and where no one sentence is insignificant. But let us not forget, with all we read and hear concerning religion, to mingle our frequent prayers to the great Author and Fountain of all grace, for that aid and assistance of his Holy Spirit, without which we can do nothing to advantage.

Antioch, the capital of Syria, built about three hundred years before Christ, had been long the most flourishing city of the East. The most remarkable circumstance of its ancient state, as suiting our present purpose, was its having been the seat and residence of Antiochus, the most cruel and inveterate enemy of the church and people of God; the most direct and eminent type of that Antichrist who was afterwards to appear in the world; spoken of expressly by prophecy in Daniel, chap. xi.; the completion of which you may see at large in the first book of Maccabees, in Josephus, and more briefly in the 79th and 80th Psalms. But behold the wisdom, the power, and the providence of God! when his people were brought low, he helped them; he set those bounds to the rage of the adversary which could not be broken through; and, at length, in his appointed time, he erected this first general standard of the gospel upon the very spot where his grand enemy had so long encamped, and from whence his pernicious counsels and enterprises had so far proceeded. The application of this is very suitable to the times in which we now live. We see a powerful combination against the Protestant interest. Our enemies are many and mighty: their designs, we have reason to believe, are deep laid, and their efforts unwearyed. Once and again our hopes have been almost swallowed up; and though we, through the singular goodness of God, have hitherto escaped, the storm has fallen heavy upon our brethren abroad. What may be the immediate issue of the present threatening appearances, we know not; but we may encourage ourselves, from the experience of past ages, as well as from the sure promises of scripture, that however the kings of the earth may assemble, and the rulers take counsel together (Psal. ii.), God has a hook in their nose, and a bridle in their jaws (Isa. xxxvii.); and all their force and policy shall at last bring about what they least desire and intend,—the welfare and glory of God’s church. He that caused the Christian name go forth first at Antioch, where the truth of God had been most eminently and successfully opposed, can likewise introduce a temper and worship truly Christian, in those places which at present seem destitute of either. And for this it is our duty continually to pray.

Again, if we consider the state of Antioch at the time the disciples were first called Christians there, we may learn how to form judgment of our profession. This city was then luxurious and dissolute to a proverb, ever in Asia, where luxury and effeminacy were universally prevalent. Whether this name

was assumed by the disciples, or imposed by their enemies, we cannot doubt but that, in common repute, it was a term of the most extreme reproach and ignominy. Nor can I suppose the worst appellations any sect in succeeding ages has been doomed to bear, have implied half of that contempt which an inhabitant of Antioch or Daphne expressed when he called a man a Christian. If we imagine a sect of people, who, at this time, in France, should style themselves the disciples of the late Damien, and be called after his name, we may perhaps form some idea of what the people of Antioch understood by the word Christian. The apostle assures us, that he and his brethren were “accounted the filth and offscouring of all things” (1 Cor. iv.) He has chosen two words of the most vile and despicable signification; which, I believe, no two words in our language will fully express. The outward state of things is since changed, and the external profession of Christianity is now no reproach; but let us not imagine the nature of things is changed too. It was then received as a maxim, That “all who will live godly in Christ Jesus, must suffer persecution” (2 Tim. iii.): and it is a truth still founded upon scripture, and confirmed by experience. If we know nothing of it in our own cases, it is because our tempers and manners have hitherto been too conformable to that wicked world which in our baptisms we were engaged to renounce. I shall have occasion to speak farther upon this point before I close; in the meantime, here is a test to examine ourselves by. If we could not glory in the Christian name, under the same circumstances as the disciples bore it at Antioch, we are yet unworthy of it. Let conscience judge.

Once more, Antioch, the city where the gospel once so flourished, that from thence the whole Christian church received that name by which it is still called, is now no more. It has been a heap of ruins more than five hundred years. The light of the gospel has been long withdrawn; gaiety and festivity are likewise forgot. Slavery, imposture, and barbarism, have blotted out the resemblance, and even the remembrance of what it once was. O that our yet happy land could from hence take a timely warning! Our privileges are great; perhaps greater, all things considered, than any nation has possessed since the days of Solomon. Our preservation hitherto has been wonderful; often have we been in extreme danger, but have always found deliverance at hand. Yet let us not be high-minded; our sins and aggravations (it is to be feared) have been, and still are, very great likewise; and God, we see, is no more a respecter of places than of persons. Antioch is ruined; Philadelphia, which received so honourable a testimony from the mouth of the Lord himself (Rev. iii.), has been long since destroyed. Let us beware of boasting; let us not presume too much on what we are; nor say, “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.” Jer. vii. We are the bulwark of the Protestant interest, and none can hurt us. If the Lord is with us, it is true; if we walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called, we are safe; but, if otherwise, we know not how soon God may visit us with his heavy judgments, war, famine, discord, or pestilence; till we become a warning to others, as others are now proposed warn-

ings to us. Our liberties, our properties, our religion, are in God's hands; may he incline our hearts to true repentance, lest at length these blessings should be taken from us, and given to a people that will bring forth more fruit.

There is an ambiguity in the original word, which our translation renders *called*; for, though that is the more general sense it bears in Heathen writers, wherever it occurs in the New Testament, except in this passage, and in Rom. vii. 3, it signifies to be taught or warned by a revelation from heaven. Thus it is spoken of Joseph and the wise men (Matth. ii.); Simeon (Luke ii.); Cornelius (Acts x.); Noah (Heb. xi.); and elsewhere. It does not therefore appear quite certain from the text, whether the disciples chose this name for themselves, or the wits of the time fixed it upon them as a mark of infamy; or, lastly, whether it was by the special direction of the Spirit of God that they assumed it. But I incline to the latter supposition; partly, because, in those happy days, it was the practice and the privilege of the disciples to ask, and to receive, direction from on high in almost every occurrence; but, chiefly, on account of the excellent instructions couched under this emphatical name, sufficient to direct and to animate those who were to be known by it, in their duty to each other, to God, and to the world. Some of these I propose to infer from the other proposition contained in the text, That the first name by which the followers of the gospel were generally known, was that of Christians.

Hitherto, as they were separated from the world, so they had been divided among themselves; and so strong were the prejudices subsisting between the members of the same body, that we find, in the beginning of this chapter, some of one party contended with the apostle Peter only for eating with those of another. Hence we read the phrases, "We of the Jews," "They of the Gentiles." But henceforward they are taught to blend and lose the greater distinction of Jew and Gentle, and the lesser divisions of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, in a denomination derived from him who alone was worthy to be their head, and who was equally "rich in mercy to all that call upon him" in every place.

And, as they thus were taught union and affection among themselves, so their relation to God, the way of their access to him, and their continual dependence upon him, were strongly implied in this name. A Christian is the child of God by faith in Christ; he draws near to God in the name of Christ; he is led and supported by the spirit of Christ! Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending, of the faith, hope, and love of every believer. From him alone every good desire proceeds: by him alone every good purpose is established: in him alone any of our best performances are acceptable. Let us beware (it is a necessary caution in these days) of a Christianity without Christ. I testify to you in plain words, that this is no better than a house without a foundation, a tree without a root, a body without a head, a hope without hope; a delusion, which, if persisted in, will end in irremediable destruction: "For other foundation can no man lay, than that which is laid, Christ Jesus:" he is the cornerstone, "chosen of God and precious." Alas for those who are of-

fended with him in whom God is well pleased! but those who trust in him shall never be ashamed. This is another important lesson comprised in the word Christian.

Nor is this all: in the name of Christian they might, and we may, read the terms upon which we are to stand with the world. If I were asked what the words Platonist or Pythagorean signified, I should say they expressed certain persons who embraced the sentiments, submitted to the institutions, and imitated the conduct of Pythagoras and Plato; and, in order to describe them farther, I need do no more than give an account of the lives and writings of their respective masters. Could I thus, in some distant, unknown country, where the name of Christianity had been only heard of, have an opportunity of declaring the history, the doctrines, and the laws of Jesus Christ; how he lived, how he taught, how he died, and upon what account; what usage he himself received from the world, and what he taught his followers to expect after he should leave them: if I should then describe the lives and the treatment of his most eminent servants, who lived immediately after him, and show, “that as he was, so were they in the world” (1 John iv.); that pursuing his pattern, they found exactly the same opposition;—would not the inhabitants of such a country conclude, even as the scripture has assured us, that the temper of Christianity, and the temper of the world, must be exactly opposite; and that, as it is said, “Whoever will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God” (James iv.), so, whoever had boldness to profess himself a friend of God, must necessarily be an enemy to the world; and would be sure to find the world, and all in it, at sworn enmity with him? But if I should farther tell them, that though the same laws, the same warnings, and the same examples, still subsist, yet that fierce opposition I have spoken of is at length nearly over, so that none are better pleased with the world, or more agreeable to it, than many of those who speak most honourably of the Christian name; would not these people immediately infer, that one of these contending powers must have yielded to the triumphant genius of the other? that either the whole world were become such Christians as those who were first styled so at Antioch, or modern Christians must be, for the most part, so only by profession, and have neither right nor pretence to their ancient spirit? And would we suppose farther, that after this information, some of these remote people were to land at Dover, and make the tour of this kingdom, can you think they would be long in determining which of these is indeed the case?

Numbers are deceived by restricting many passages in the New Testament to the times at which they were delivered, though it seems to have been the great care of the apostles to prevent, if possible, our making this mistake. St. John, having expressly said, “if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him,” immediately explains what he means by the world, namely, “the lust of the flesh, he lust of the eye, and the pride of life,” John ii. If high distinction, vain show, and sensual pleasure, make no part of the world at this

day, I must allow that we have no part in the apostle's decision, nor any cause to observe his caution; but if these things are as highly prized, as eagerly, and almost as universally pursued now in Britain as they were sixteen hundred years since at Rome and Antioch, surely we bear the name of Christians in vain; if our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, our comforts and our cares, are not very different from those of the generality among whom we live. "If any man," says St. Paul, "have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his," Rom. viii. Now, whatever more is meant by the phrase of having the spirit of Christ, it must certainly mean thus much at least, a disposition and turn of mind in some degree conformable to the mind that was in Christ Jesus, to be evidenced by a life and conversation suitable to his precepts and example. "He was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners; he went about doing good," Heb. vii. He was gentle and compassionate, meek and patient under the greatest provocations; so active for the glory of God, that his zeal, by a strong and lively figure, is said to have eaten him up (John ii.); so affected with the worth of souls, that he wept over his bitterest enemies; so intent on his charitable designs towards men, that an opportunity of helping or instructing them was as meat and drink when he was hungry (John, iv.), and made him forget weariness and pain; so full of devotion towards God, that when the day had been wholly consumed in his labours of love, he would frequently redeem whole nights for prayer, Luke vi. But I must stop. No pen can describe, no heart conceive, the life of the Son of God in the flesh: yet, in all these things he was our great exemplar; and no profession or appellation can benefit us, unless we are of those who copy closely and carefully after him. For thus saith the beloved apostle, "He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself so to walk even as he walked. He that saith I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him," 1 John ii.

I shall conclude with a short address to three sorts of persons. And, first, If there are any such here (would to God this part of my labour may prove needless!) I would recommend this subject to the consideration of those who have almost, if not altogether, cast off the honourable name into which they were baptized, who, trusting to what they call the light of nature, and the powers of human reason, venture to determine the fitness of things by their own standard, and declare in their words, as well as by their actions, "they will not have this man to rule over them," Luke, xix. Is not this an unaccountable event upon your plan, that the name which first went out from Antioch, under the greatest disadvantages, should so soon overspread the world, without arts or arms, without any force, or any motive of any external kind? Is it possible that any kind or degree of enthusiasm could influence, not a few, at one time, or in one place, but multitudes, of all ages, sexes, tempers, and circumstances, to embrace a profession which, in proportion to the strictness wherewith it was followed, was always attended with reproach and suffering? Those places which were most noted for opposition to this way, have been long since buried

in the dust; but a succession of those whom the world counted “not worthy to live, and of whom the world was not worthy” (Acts xxv. Heb. xi.), has always subsisted, and still subsists. Had you lived in those days when Jesus Christ assured a company of poor disregarded fishermen, that neither the power nor the policy of the world, nor the gates of hell, should ever prevail against them (Matth. xvi.), you might have been less inexcusable in refusing to believe him. But now, when you have the accomplishment of this promise before your eyes, and well know (for you are book-read) what various attempts have been made, with what steadiness and formidable appearances they have been for a while carried on, to render these words vain, but how at length such attempts have totally failed, and ended in the confusion and ruin of those who engaged in them,—what tolerable reason can you assign for the part you act? Does the tendency of the gospel displease you? Is it an enemy to that virtue you are so fond of talking of? On the contrary, we are ready to put it to the proof, that here are not only the sublimest maxims of true virtue, but that the practice, or even the real love of virtue, are quite unattainable upon any other scheme, and that the most specious pretences, independent of this, are no more than great “swelling words of vanity,” 2 Pet. ii. I speak the more freely upon this point, because I speak from experience. I was once as you are. I verily thought that I “ought to do” (or at least that I might do) “many things against Jesus of Nazareth,” Acts xxvi. None even went farther than me, according to the limits of my years and capacity, in opposing the truths of the gospel. But the mercy of God spared me; and his providence having led me through various changes and circumstances of life, in each of which I have had a still deeper conviction of my former errors, has at length given me this opportunity to tell you, (O that I could speak it to your hearts!) that at the name of Jesus every knee” (sooner or later) “must bow” (Phil. ii.); before him every heart must either bend or break; that he is full of mercy, love, and pardon, to all that submit themselves to him; but that, ere long, he shall be “revealed from heaven in flaming fire, to execute judgment, and to convince ungodly sinners of all the hard speeches they have spoken against him,” Jude.

I would, 2dly, address those who, while they profess to believe in the Lord Jesus, do in their works manifestly deny him, Tit. i. This is, if possible, a worse case than the other, yet how frequent! You believe that Jesus Christ came into the world both to be a propitiation for sin and also to give us an example of a godly life, and yet continue contentedly in the practice of those sins for which he poured forth his soul, in the pursuit of those vices which the gospel disallows, and in the indulgence of those desires which your own consciences condemn. Think, I entreat you of these words in the 50th psalm; unto the wicked God saith, “What hast thou to do, that thou shouldst take my covenant into thy mouth: seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee?” This question is now proposed to our consciences, that we may be aware in time of the danger of insincerity, and not “perish with a lie in our right hands,” Is. xliv. If we cannot answer it now, what shall we say in that

awful hour when God shall speak in ten thousand thunders to all who, in this life, presumed to mock him with an empty outside worship? “drawing near him with their lips, when their hearts were far from him,” Is. xxix. For the day is at hand, the day of the Lord, when God shall bring every hidden thing to light, when every man’s works shall be tried and weighed; tried in the fire of his purity, weighed in the balance of his righteousness; and as the issue proves, so must the consequence abide to all eternity: a trial and a scrutiny which no flesh could abide, were it not for the interposing merits of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Judge. But he has already told us that he will then own none but those who were faithfully devoted to his service here. To the urgent cries and strongest pleas of others, he will give no other answer, but “I know you not, I never knew you,” Matth. vii. “Depart from me ye cursed, into everlasting fire,” Matth. xxv. What will it then avail to plead our privileges, when, if this be all, we may read our doom already? “And that servant who knew his master’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; for unto whomsoever much is given, of him much shall be required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more,” Luke xii. O consider this, ye that forget God, lest he tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver.

Finally, let those who through grace have attained to worship God in spirit and in truth, be careful to adorn and hold fast their profession. You see your calling brethren: let the name of Christian always remind you of your high obligation to, and continual dependence upon, the author of your faith. Use it as a means to animate and regulate your whole behaviour. And if upon some occasions, you find undeserved ill offices, or unkind constructions, wonder not at it: thus it must and will be, more or less, to all who would exercise themselves in keeping a conscience void of offence, Acts xxiv. Yet be careful to model your actions by the rule of God’s word. Our Lord says, “Blessed are ye when men revile you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake,” Matth. v. Observe, first, the evil spoken of you must be false and groundless; and, 2dly, the cause must be for the sake of Christ, and not for any singularities of your own, either in sentiment or practice, which you cannot clearly maintain from scripture. It is a great blessing when the innocence and simplicity of the dove is happily blended with true wisdom. It is a mercy to be kept from giving unnecessary offence, in these times of division and discord. Endeavour that a principle of love to God, and to mankind for his sake, may have place in all your actions: this will be a secret, seasonable, and infallible guide, in a thousand incidents, where particular rules, cannot reach. “Be sober, be vigilant, continue instant in prayer,” and in a little while all your conflicts shall determine in conquest, faith shall give place to sight, and hope to possession. Yet a little while, and “Christ, who is our life, shall appear” (Col. iii.), to vindicate his truth, to put a final end to all evil and offence; and then we also, even all who have loved him, and waited for him, “shall appear with him in

glory,” Is. xxv.